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ABSTRACT

This discussion regarding the effects on black children's academic achievement of their behavior and that of their families, schools, and teachers involves three major thrusts. First is an analysis of those social currents of the past three decades that have shaped relationships between black families and the behaviors they promote in their children, on the one hand, and public schools and the behaviors they demand of black students, on the other. Second is a review of research on black children's behavioral skills and academic achievement, and related processes of black families and public schools. Finally, policy implications stemming from the historical analysis and research review are explored. It is argued that preferred policy options related to black children's achievement are ones that seek to ensure that (1) black children are valued; (2) continuity exists between children's home and school experiences; and (3) those experiences are ones in which children encounter success, unambiguous expectations, and demands for excellence. (Author/GC)

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Black Children's Behavioral Skills in the Home and School Setting: A Historical and Research Review with Policy Implications

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This paper was prepared for presentation at the Black Family Issues Forum of the 14th Annual Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Legislative Weekend, September, 1984, Washington, DC.

Running head: BLACK CHILDREN AT HOME AND SCHOOL

Abstract

This discussion of the effects on black children's academic achievement of their behavior and that of their families, schools, and teachers involves three major thrusts: (a) A historical and cultural analysis of those social undercurrents of the past 30 years that have shaped relationships between, on one hand, black families and the behaviors they promote in their children and, on the other hand, public schools and the behaviors they demand of black students; (b) a review of major research findings on black children's behavioral skills and academic achievement, and related processes of black families and public schools; (c) an explanation of those policy implications stemming from findings of the historical analysis and research review. It is argued that preferred policy options related to black children's achievement are ones that seek to ensure: Black children are valued; continuity exists between children's home and school experiences; those experiences are ones where children encounter both success and unambiguous expectations and demands for excellence.

Black Children's Behavioral Skills in the Home and School Setting: A Historical and Research Review with Policy Implications

It is indeed an honor to be a participant on this family issues panel of the 14th Annual Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Legislative Weekend. I would like to use this opportunity to share some ideas and data on black children's behavioral skills and school achievement, and related public policy issues.

Let me begin with the observation that current concerns about black children's behaviors and their academic achievement partially reflect a growing disenchantment with the success of earlier social change. During the 1950s and 1960s, radical educational changes occurred. These changes resulted in more universal access to schools and greater equity in distributing educational resources. In black communities, these changes were symbolized most visibly by the 1954 Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education court decision, which resulted in school desegregation, and by the later enactment of the Headstart and Title I (ESEA) programs.

But now we are beginning to acknowledge that black children's experiences in accessible schools with relatively equitably distributed resources are not as positive and successful as initially envisioned. U.S. Census (1983) data

indicate that those blacks who are ages 25 to 34 years, and the first generation to reap the benefits of the educational changes of the 1950s and the 1960s, have reached parity with their non-black counterparts in years of school completed.[1] But scores on nationally standardized tests suggest that black children are far from parity with their white counterparts in their mastery of academic skills.[2] Consequently, black families and communities currently are most concerned about the sources of, and solutions for, social group differences in school achievement. It is a concern that leads to questions about those processes of families and schools that either undergird or undermine student motivation and achievement behavior.

African-American Communities and Public Schools: The Cultural-Historical Context

I would like to suggest that if one is both to understand the sources of racial differences in school achievement, and to design effective research, policy, and programs for the eradication of such differences, then one must adopt a cultural and historical perspective.

Let me briefly illustrate the need for such a perspective by sharing a bit of my own educational history, which by virtue of the time of its occurrence exemplifies many of the undercurrents that have shaped changes in the relationships between black families and public schools.

A Personal Reminiscence

In the Fall of 1952, with great glee, I entered the morning Kindergarten of Booker T. Washington School in Kansas City, Missouri. I soon discovered my Kindergarten experience would be a bit unusual. For one thing, Booker T. was overcrowded. Consequently, Kindergarten classes were conducted down the street from the main school building in an old dance hall. And every day after Kindergarten, my teacher checked to see that my coat was fastened correctly and my hat and scarf were snugly in place. She then sent me and my classmates outside where we picked up our picket signs and joined hands with various available adults. For me, Kindergarten included picketing for an additional school for my community, as all the black schools in town were bursting at the seams while white schools sat half empty in testament to the increasing march of whites to suburbia.

The following Fall, when I entered the first grade, we got our new Negro school. I remember quite vividly that my classmates and I couldn't get over the fact that the formerly white and very prestigious Thomas Hart Benton School had been declared a Negro school! And we shared stories about the wonders of this new school--its indoor swimming pool, its dance room complete with mirrors and ballet bars, its science laboratories. Of course, by the time we blacks entered the door, the school's name had been changed, the pool, the dance room and

science labs had disappeared, and many of the spacious classrooms were cut in two. My classmates and I talked bitterly about these changes. Nevertheless, we were fearlessly proud of this new school that we had picketed for on chilly winter afternoons.

Before our new school had black kids in it for a month, arson was committed and half the school burned down. So, for the remainder of that year and all of the next, we went to school in double shifts, sat two to a seat, and shared one set of books per grade level. Stalwart black teachers refused to blink an eye or miss a step--and they continued to carry on the business of educating black children.

In the Fall of 1955, integration came to Kansas City. And for two rather interesting years, my classmates and I attended schools that were racially integrated. But the School Board's commitment was not complete: An open-transfer policy was permitted. And soon my integrated school was 95% black. Thus was the remainder of my elementary and secondary education--in public, predominantly black, de facto segregated schools. And in such schools, I increasingly would find myself the object of changing definitions--"disadvantaged," "in need of cultural enrichment," " a victim of deprivation," "a participant in our special program." Momma and Daddy just kept telling me, "You are as smart as a tack is sharp." And I believed them.

As a postscript to this little history, I might add that a few weeks ago, ABC-TV aired a special report on education in which it featured my alma mater, Central High School. On that program, Central was characterized as your typical ghetto school--distinguished by its violence and its lack of student achievement. Maybe so--I just know that members of my graduating class of 1965, many of whom I had known since my Booker T. Kindergarten days, earned admission to such colleges as Antioch, Barnard, Brown, Fisk, Grinnell, Harvard, Howard, Mount Holyoke, Princeton, Radcliffe, Stanford, Trinity, University of Chicago, Wellesley, West Point, and Yale. But, seemingly, things have changed.

The Changing Relationship Between Black Families and Public Schools

I share this reminiscence of my personal educational history in order to remind you of the paradoxical effects of social change on black children's behaviors and education. On one hand, de jure segregated schools were associated with a racial inequity of educational access and resources that often reached the level of absurdity. But on the other hand, restrictions imposed on black communities by patterns of social segregation promoted a continuity of experience between home and school. In social science jargon, one may speak of this continuity of experience as linkages between settings through which formal and informal

communications could occur about children's expected and observed attitudes, activities, and behaviors in various settings (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, the social and spatial restrictions associated with segregation promoted a situation in which it was at least possible for parents and teachers to share information about black children, not only at the school, but also in such settings as the church, the grocery store, the beauty shop, and the street. Parents and teachers were thus enabled to modify their own behavior with children in order to effect greater congruence in children's experiences in different settings. And by doing so, both parents and teachers were able to develop some sense of ownership and partnership in the enterprise of educating children.

Because of such continuity or linkages, I experienced no sense of ambivalence or incongruity in seeking to master the tasks of Kindergarten and in picketing my Kindergarten. My parents, my teacher, my peers, and others who were significant in my life believed that both sets of activities were important and good. Consequently, my activities in school, after school, and at home were a frequent topic of conversation among all the adults important in my life.

In contrast to the segregation of the 1950s, black families and public schools confronted new experiences in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, black children increasingly were bused into

situations that often were not only strange and alien, but also hostile. Teachers increasingly were indoctrinated into a pedagogy that emphasized the cognitive, cultural, and social deficits of black children. As a result, schools increasingly viewed black children's behavior both as different from that of white children, and as at odds with processes of good teaching and learning. Black parents themselves came to be viewed as the source of black children's deficiencies.

Collectively, such experiences resulted in spatial, social, and psychological barriers to informal sharing, by parents and teachers, of information about children. It has been noted that such information-sharing is especially important for individuals and social groups entering new settings and new historical situations. In such instances, information-sharing not only serves in clarifying behavioral expectations, but also serves in assisting all affected parties reach some consensus on the definition and characteristics of the new situation (Wheeler, 1966).

But during the 1960s and 1970s, the presence of barriers to information-sharing caused black parents and public schools to get out of contact with each others' needs and expectations. Oh, there were efforts to bridge the growing schism between black families and the schools. Such efforts included citizen participation mechanisms, mandated parent involvement in

federally-funded educational programs, and community-controlled local school boards. But in recent years, the funds and the will to support such efforts have faded.

The current racial differences in school achievement represent not only the legacy of past racial inequities--they also represent those consequences of past social change strategies that probably were unintended, but firmly rooted in racial differences of culture and history.

Pertinent Research Findings

Black Families as Learning Environments

Fortunately, researchers are providing much-needed theory and data pertinent to the current effects on black children's school achievement of processes of black families and public schools. For example, researchers have investigated families as learning environments. In doing so, emphasis is placed on identifying those activities, behaviors, and attitudes of both the family and its individual members that provide children with those skills, behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes associated with high academic achievement.

Most recently, Reginald Clark (1983) conducted an ethnographic study of the learning environments of low-income black two-parent and single-parent families. He found that families with relatively high-achieving adolescents were distinguished by family activities that are highly structured,

ritualized, and goal-directed. In such families, all members have certain tasks, related to some specific purpose, that are expected to be done at designated times.

Other researchers have found that black children's high achievement is associated with such family behaviors as:

1. High parental concern about education (Davidson & Greenberg, 1977).

2. Parents who have high behavioral and achievement expectations of the child and who effectively set controls on the child and insist that he meet parental standards (Glaser & Ross, 1970).

3. A strong, positive, and consistent relationship between the child and at least one adult care-giver (Hirsch & Costello, 1967; Silverstein & Krate, 1975).

4. Mothers who both value education and job advancement, and insist that their children learn instrumental skills related to the making and spending of money (Wilkinson & O'Connor, 1977).

Generally, low-achieving children live in families that do not consistently engage in such behaviors. Sometimes parents of low-achieving children do not understand how different family behaviors can positively or negatively influence children's achievement. And often, families of low-achieving children are characterized by marked economic insecurity and by an absence of positive, supportive, and instrumental relationships with family,

friends, and community institutions (cf. Clark, 1983; Wilkinson & O'Connor, 1977). Consequently, these families experience reoccurring personal problems and complex life predicaments that prevent them from engaging consistently in family behaviors related to achievement.

School Processes Affecting Achievement

Researchers also have investigated those school processes that affect black children's achievement. In this area, pioneering work has been conducted by Leacock, Lightfoot, Ogbu, Rist, St. John, and others. These researchers have documented the deleterious effects on black children's achievement that result when:

1. School boards and administrators are influenced primarily by a single element of the community while relating to other segments of the community in a subordinate, paternalistic, patron-client manner (Ogbu, 1974).

2. Schools both fail to incorporate black cultural experiences into the classroom, and fail to actively cooperate and collaborate with black community institutions and families (Lightfoot, 1978).

3. Teachers have low expectations or negative perceptions of black children (Rist, 1970, 1973).

4. Teachers engage in a task-oriented teaching and behavioral style and emphasizes their subject competence, instead

of engaging in a child-oriented style that requires interpersonal skill (St. John, 1971).

5. The type and frequency of teachers' interactions with children are racially biased (Brophy & Good, 1974; Feldman & Orchowsky, 1979; Leacock, 1969).

6. Classroom activities are characterized by little curricular differentiation, frequent use of letter or number grades, monotonous teaching and learning formats, and low levels of social interaction (Boykin, 1978, 1981; Morgan, 1977, 1982; Simpson, 1977).

But, in addition to identifying those school processes that undermine black children's achievement, we also know that schools can develop a track record of black academic excellence (Sowell, 1976). According to Clark (1983, Ch. 10), schools that promote black achievement are distinguished by their leadership and management, the excellence of their teachers, active classroom activities and tasks, and the active involvement of parents in instructional activities.

Effects on Achievement of Home-School Relationships

Researchers also are beginning to examine the more complex issue of the relationship between home and school processes and related effects on children's achievement. In this area of research, the key issues involve linkages between black families and schools.

In general, studies have found a discontinuity, or lack of statistical relationship, between processes of black families and schools. For example, Slaughter (1977) conducted a seven-year longitudinal study of the effects of maternal behavior on school achievement. She found that when children first entered school, those children who were viewed as "achievers" by their teachers had mothers who valued education and achievement, and who communicated with the child in a warm, individualized, and thoughtful manner. But by the time these children were in the sixth grade, this relationship between maternal behavior and teachers' perceptions no longer existed. Slaughter concluded that these black children's later school experience was discontinuous with their early childhood experience at home. Slaughter speculated that mothers had modified their expectations and behaviors in reaction to their children's accumulated histories of failure and success at school.

I observed a similar type of home-school discontinuity when I investigated the relationship between children's academic achievement and their behavioral skills at home and in the neighborhood (Holliday, in press). Children who were viewed by mothers as high competent--that is, as performing specific skills with high frequency and effectiveness at home and in the neighborhood--were not necessarily high academic achievers. In fact, mothers and teachers tended neither to agree in their

perceptions of the level of the children's behavioral competence, nor to agree in their perceptions of the areas of the children's behavioral strengths. Mothers perceived children, in the home and neighborhood, as demonstrating problem-solving skills with greatest frequency and effectiveness. But teachers perceived these children, at school, as demonstrating interpersonal skills with greatest frequency and effectiveness.

Such differences in mothers' and teachers' perceptions may reflect differences in the types of demands made of children in the home and school. These perception differences also may reflect an absence of sufficient opportunities for children to demonstrate those skills most demanded in one setting in some other setting. Indeed, some scholars argue that blacks' history of restricted opportunity coupled with their African heritage has resulted in racial group differences in the types of problems typically confronted, the availability of resources for problem-solving, and the types of problem-solving strategies used (Ogbu, 1984). Consequently, black families often must cultivate and value some modes of thinking, strategies for success, behavioral skills, and expressive style that are not highly valued in the broader society and that are frowned upon at school (Hale, 1982; Henderson & Washington, 1975; Ogbu, 1981).

Despite the need for more research on those undoubtedly multiple and complex factors underlying the discontinuity in

black children's experiences in the home and school, scholars generally agree on the effects of such discontinuity. Such discontinuity results in standardized achievement scores that tend to progressively deteriorate during children's public school careers (Congressional Budget Office, 1977). It also results in an overrepresentation of black children in EMR classrooms (Gay, 1981) and the associated phenomenon of the six-hour retarded child (Simkins, Gunnings, & Kearney, 1973).

Summary of Major Findings

To summarize, research on the relationships between the processes of families and schools and on black children's achievement reveal the following major findings.

1. We know that certain types of parenting behaviors and family routines are associated with relatively high academic achievement.

2. We know that this association between parenting behavior, family routines, and academic achievement is strongest when children first begin schooling, but this association weakens over time.

3. We know that certain types of school processes and teacher behaviors undermine high achievement, and other school processes and teacher behaviors promote high achievement.

4. We know that the behavioral skills perceived to be most frequently demanded of black children in the home and

neighborhood differ from those skills perceived to be most frequently demanded of these children at school.

5. We know that, in general, black children receive below-average scores on standardized tests of achievement.

Implications for Public Policy

Collectively, these research findings suggest that issues related to black children's achievement constitute a predicament. And as a predicament, these issues involve multiple, interrelated, contradictory, historically- and culturally-rooted factors. Consequently, we must view with skepticism and we must resist those attempts to reduce this complex predicament to statements of a single, isolated problem. Examples of such single-problem statements are: "The problem with black children is that their parents neither use proper childrearing practices nor inculcate proper values"; or "The problem with the schools is that they are full of incompetent teachers"; or "The reason children don't learn is because schools are filled with violent and disruptive students."

Let us briefly examine some policy initiatives that recently have been proposed in at least partial response to such single-problem statements. It has been proposed that prayer in the schools can aid in the inculcation of proper family values. Teacher incompetence is addressed by the increasing use of teachers' scores on paper-and-pencil tests as criteria for

hiring, tenure, and promotion. At the President's direction, the Justice Department has initiated various activities related to combating school violence and increasing the rights of teachers and administrators to suspend, expel, and otherwise punish students who are viewed as unruly. And, of course, if none of these initiatives are pleasing to the public, there is always that fail-safe initiative that would support public inattentiveness to black children's predicament: Provision of private tuition tax credits, which would encourage abandonment of public schools.

A critical analysis of such policy initiatives related to single-problem statements reveals that these statements spawn a series of simple, isolated solutions that are totally unrelated to each other--both conceptually and programmatically. Thus, solutions related to single-problem statements tend to be based on radically differing assumptions, and the program or legal activities of one solution are in no way conceptually linked or programmatically coordinated with activities of other solutions. Moreover, there exists precious little research suggesting that many of previously noted initiatives will result in increased student achievement. In fact, research findings suggest that many of these initiatives will affect blacks disproportionately negatively. The point I wish to make is that solutions reflecting single-problem statements on black children's

achievement will, most likely, neither result in disentangling the complexity of black children's predicament, nor result in significant and stable increases in black children's achievement.

A focus on predicaments instead of problems is troublesome for our traditional policy paradigm, which is characterized by pragmatism, practicality, and efficiency. This paradigm leads to the typicial policy process involving: Identifying a particular, isolated, remedial problem; devising an easily explained, quick-effect program to ameliorate this problem; rigorously monitoring this program to ensure both that its "significant effects"--that is those that are readily visible--are quickly detected and that reports of these effects are rapidly disseminated to the public (McClintock, 1976; York, 1978). Under this paradigm, policy options generally are of the "either/or" type.

In contrast to the assumptions of the traditional policy paradigm, I wish to argue that effective policy initiatives related to black children's achievement must be grounded in the recognition that the current predicament represents both the accumulative effects of black parents and children's past experiences, and those of past social policies. Effective intervention on black children's achievement must involve <u>simultaneous</u> action on family behavior, school processes, teacher behaviors, and home-school relations. This means preferred policy options are of the "both/and" type. This means we need to

provide black families both social and economic supports, and training in those childrearing and home management skills - necessary for promoting children's academic excellence. At the same time, we must encourage teachers both to recognize the strengths of black children, black families, and black communities, and to incorporate these strengths into their classroom activities. And, at the same time, we must demand that schools relate to the families in ways that encourage both the cultivation of informal opportunities for parents and teachers to share information about children, and the development of parents' and teachers' ownership of, and partnership in children's education.

Conclusion

In concluding, I wish to reiterate three points. First, research findings indicate that issues related to black children's academic achievement and behavioral skills are complex and rooted in historical and cultural factors. Second, those public policies affecting black children's achievement that reflect single-problem statements probably will not result in significant gains in black student achievement. Instead, greater positive effects are more likely to result from policies that address multiple factors simultaneously. Third, I urge that our choice of policy options affecting black children's achievement be guided by a preference for those options that seek three

objectives: Preferred policies are ones that (a) ensure that black children are valued, (b) promote greater continuity in children's experiences at home and school, and (c) ensure that children's experiences at home and school involve success and unambiguous expectations and demands for excellence.

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Footnotes

[1]In 1982, the median school years completed by all persons in the U.S. ages 25 to 29 years was 12.8 years. The comparable figure for blacks was 12.7 years. Among all persons ages 30 to 34 years, the median school years completed was 12.9 years. The comparable figure for blacks was 12.6 years (U.S. Census, 1983, p. 146).

[2]Findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate that reading scores of black nine-year-olds were, on the average, 13 percentile points lower than those of nine-year-old whites. Among 16-year-olds, the average black/white reading score differential was 19 percentile points. Similar trends in racial differences were found on tests in other subject areas (Congressional Budget Office, 1977).